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Acting deputy sought to help NSC deal with heavy agenda

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White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan said yesterday the National Security Council has been hampered by the illness of its deputy director, Donald R. Fortier, as the administration girds for important decisions on arms control, a U.S.-Soviet summit and South Africa.

Mr. Regan said an acting deputy director will be chosen soon to fill in for the duration of Mr. Fortier's illness. He has cancer.

Mr. Regan described Mr. Fortier, 39, in glowing terms as a major behind-the-scenes player in such foreign policy initiatives as the handling of Libya, terrorism and military aid for anti-Marxist resistance movements.

Adm. John M. Poindexter, the president's national security adviser, will come to grips with the appointment of an acting deputy within two weeks, Mr. Regan said in a luncheon meeting with editors and reporters at The Washington Times. He said the White House already is looking at a specific candidate, whom he declined to name.

Mr. Regan also gave a strong vote of confidence to Adm. Poindexter, whom he called a "brilliant" man who does a fine job of reconciling the conflicting views of different departments and policy proponents within the administration. He flatly dismissed published reports that Adm. Poindexter has not been effective in his job.

The chief of staff also expressed hopes yesterday for a summit meeting this year between President Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

"The time frame for that is after Election Day and before Christmas," Mr. Regan said. "I think it's in their interest as well as in our interest that we meet."

He said Mr. Reagan would like to show Mr. Gorbachev some of the United States, even if it is just on a helicopter ride from Richmond to Baltimore.

"We think it would be good for him to see the United States — he's never



Photo by Perry Thorvik/The Washington Times

Donald Regan meets with Washington Times staff members yesterday.

visited here — and to see more of it than just Washington and New York," said Mr. Regan, the president's first treasury secretary.

The chief of staff, a former chairman of Merrill Lynch & Co., also predicted that the current economic recovery, which began in late 1982, could continue for another two years or more.

The leading economic indicators, a barometer of future economic health, are still up and the stock market continues to flirt with new highs, Mr. Regan said.

"We're on the right track as long as we stay on the track of Gramm-Rudman [the balanced budget law], no matter what the Supreme Court may say in the next week or two about Gramm-Rudman," he said. The high court is expected soon to hand down a decision on the constitutionality of the law, parts of which a lower federal court declared unconstitutional.

The chief of staff made several other points:

- The administration is attempting to strengthen its contacts with a broader range of South African leaders as part of an effort to explore new solutions to the country's crisis within the current U.S. policy of "constructive engagement."

Mr. Regan said those contacts include dealing with non-Marxist members of South Africa's outlawed African National Congress.

- The White House has "tamped down" efforts by CIA director William Casey to prosecute news organizations, including The Times, for publishing highly classified "communications intelligence" in news stories.

Mr. Regan said decisions to prosecute for leaks of classified information must be made on a case-by-case basis. He said, the administration must be careful to distinguish between seriously damaging leaks of national security information and leaks that "we don't like because they embarrass us."

He said the "information loop" within the administration has been "narrowed" to control who gets access to sensitive information and thus to limit leaks. He cited Mr. Reagan's recent Supreme Court nominations as an example of a well-kept secret.

- The president is in excellent physical shape. Doctors last month gave the 75-year-old Mr. Reagan a clean bill of health. But the president has an allergy that makes his voice very husky, and he is taking shots for that, Mr. Regan said.

- An attempt by White House officials to get former ambassador to Mexico John Gavin to resign in early 1985 was mishandled, he said. Presidential personnel chief Robert Tuttle should not have called Mr. Gavin on an open telephone line, with the possibility of others listening in, to ask for his resignation, he said.